

**GREAT  
PERFORMANCE**



# BARBARA STANWYCK

Love induces its own confidence game and criminal behaviour in Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve*, which, if not the apogee of the screwball genre, makes an incontestable case – if one ever needed to be made – for the reputation of its captivating lead, Barbara Stanwyck. To say she has never been more radiant would be apocryphal, given the highlights that pepper her career; although opposite Henry Fonda, who makes for a fitting patsy, Stanwyck shuttles between the frosty and impetuous in the twinkle of an eye.

*The Lady Eve* doesn't so much follow the rom-com formula (boy meets girl, loses her, wins her back) but rather flips it by empowering the inamorata whose charms, thanks to Stanwyck, the vision fleeting, derive from being the movie's aggressor. The set up is simple but, in adhering to the typical whims prone to the Sturges screenplay, soon spirals into chaos with romance being the essential catalyst. Stanwyck's Jean Harrington, a grifter working in tandem with a

sophisticated group of con artists that includes her father (played by Charles Coburn), has been killing her time by fleecing rich passengers on a cruise ship. The grand plan, however, concerns pulling one over millionaire playboy Henry Fonda, the dimwitted son of a beer magnate. Destiny, like the film's incredible card game, is fixed, hearts, in contrast, are not.

Sturges loves to toy with the social masks people adopt in order to better blend into their environments. Naturally con artists make for an apt occupation, given the movie's game of love. Inevitably, self-delusion becomes symptomatic of a sickness once the tricks of the trade are made transparent. When Fonda learns more than he'd like to about Stanwyck, the break-up plays out like a collision of pride. Until the moment she is shaken by the situation, Stanwyck's confidence, expressed in part by her swaying carriage, suggests, at least for 1941, sexual prowess. The eyes have it.

Stanwyck's abilities are many and yet hinge on subtle choices, determined

as she is for the most part to openly communicating more than dialogue with her fellow performers. The overall effect, achieved knowingly with the viewer, is a shared delight. More magic than science, Stanwyck, nonetheless, creates the chemistry. A furtive stare reads like she's one dirty thought ahead of everyone else. And in one sense she is.

Ultimately, Jean chooses to impose herself on the world. Having played a prank so that Fonda will fall in love with her, and a crueler one so that she can fall back in love with him, Jean tries on different guises and is fundamentally changed – for the better.

"I'm going to be exactly the way that he thinks I am, the way he'd like me to be," she tells her father, who disapproves of her instant reform. To a certain extent Sturges ratifies that honourable intentions are indeed anathema to the pursuit and persuasion of a lover. In order to get the girl or guy, as the case may be in *The Lady Eve*, a little bit of larceny, sometimes, doesn't go astray.